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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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Faculty Mentor: Dr. Thomas Heffernan

PROJECT TITLE: Confronting the 'Slings and Arrows'
of Life: An Exploration of God's Justice
in the Depths of Human Suffering

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Thomas Heffernan, Faculty Mentor

Date: April 28, 1999

Comments (Optional):

Please see attached sheet.



April 28, 1999

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For the Committee:

This is an excellent study of the one of the most difficult theological and ethical problems that thinkers have confronted. In the West, the issue of theodicy has bedeviled the most sophisticated thinkers since we have written documents. Already by the time the author of the Book of Job takes up pen the problem is old and has been treated in Mesopotamian literature. That for three millennia theodicy continues to confound our notions of a deity who is merciful is a testimony to the intellectual richness of the problem.

Ms. Godbey has done an excellent job of surveying some of the major authors who have treated this issue, both ancient and contemporary. Her handling of the questions is sensitive, well balanced, and bibliographically very sound. From our conversations, it is clear that she has allowed her own ideas to be challenged by those of the many scholars she cites. This last point needs iterating since she has really done an admirable job of covering the literature. She appears to have grown intellectually in the process of considering the issue of divine mercy in a world apparently overwhelmed with random acts of violence.

I have met with weekly throughout the composition and can testify to the steady progress that she has made.

I believe this senior project is first rate and I am assigning it the grade of A.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Thomas J. Heffernan".

Thomas J. Heffernan,
Professor

**Confronting the 'Slings
and Arrows' of Life:
An Exploration of God's Justice
in the Depths of Human Suffering**

4/26/99

Susy Godbey

English 498

Senior Honors Thesis

Preface

The question of God's justice never really plagued my mind until March of 1998, when I traveled with some campus ministries at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, to a small village in Mexico in an attempt to experience somewhat of an "alternative" Spring Break. It was there, in a colonia named "Solidaridade" that I first saw and understood the word injustice. With a group of about 40 students, I worked for five days to build a foundation for the house of the community's new minister. With hands, shovels, wheelbarrows, and buckets, we moved mounds of dirt, poured concrete, and laid cement block. I was very disillusioned to see that what had taken us a week to do would have taken less than a day in the United States, where equipment and machinery are more readily available.

Most disheartening was our trip to the bustling city of Reynosa at the end of the week. Excited about the prospects of buying cheap liquor and multi-colored blankets, we suddenly found ourselves face-to-face with some of the most terrible living conditions any of us had ever seen. As we drove through what looked like a garbage dump, we saw people living in shacks and scavenging for food. In this place, where dirty plastic bags covered the trees like leaves and all anyone could see for miles was trash, we met a family of three generations—a grandmother, her son, and her grandson. We knew from the looks on their faces that this was the only life they had known or would probably ever know. This is where justice stopped for me.

When I came home from this trip, from this experience that was supposed to bring me closer to God, I was filled with anger and disgust as I looked around my apartment at the things I had always taken for granted. It was as if I lived in a palace, while the people

I met on my trip lived in unbelievable squalor. I cried for them, that they would never know the life I lived, but I cried moreso because I could not understand why I was given so much while they were given so little.

With this paper, I was given the opportunity to search for some closure to the questions that I have been asking myself and my God ever since that trip. Because I have never experienced great tragedy, I felt that the answers I could come up with would never be right or fair to those who have. So, in my attempts to understand God's justice in the face of suffering, I have tried to see through the eyes of those who have questioned God in their own suffering, in times of utter despair. And through the lives of Job, J.B., Kushner, and Wiesel, I have come to understand much more about my own answer to this problem. Furthermore, I have also learned the enormity of this issue and realized that it could never be tackled through a semester's worth of work.

The conclusions that I have come to are, for myself, still incomplete. I know it will take me a lifetime of experiences to find the answers I am looking for, as I know that I still have a very naïve understanding of the world around me. The exploration of justice in this paper, though, has helped me this semester, especially in my studies in the Normandy Scholars program. The evils of World War II have weighed heavy on my heart and mind, and I am glad to have had this opportunity to give a voice to my thoughts. This experience has helped me to learn and digest many events of the War that are unacceptable to a humane heart and mind.

I would like to thank my project director, Dr. Thomas Heffernan, for working with me this semester and challenging me to look deeper within myself for the confidence and the will to be who I want to be. I am truly grateful to have been given the

opportunity to work with such a great man and teacher. Thank you also to Dr. Allison Ensor, my second reader, who has offered me many suggestions that have contributed to the quality of my paper.

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Introduction

In the evening news and daily papers around the world, we are bombarded with images of incessant tragedy as we hear and read of murders, bombings, fighting, freak accidents, and forces of nature that all cause pain and suffering in peoples' lives. We often do not digest what we hear or read, though, because we find it much easier not to let it break the surface of our conscience when it does not directly affect us. When such things become more personal and directly affect us within our own lives, however, then we are forced to feel the impact and deal with the pain.

Within such tragedies we suffer in many different ways, but most often, we suffer the anger and confusion of wanting justification. To ask "Why?" seems to be a human response that very few are immune to. When tragedy strikes in someone's life, that person is usually challenged to reconcile his or her image of God with the pain he or she is feeling. Some choose to reject God at this point; others choose to search for reasons from God. Within faith, we struggle to accept these things within the confines of a God who created the world where good and evil both play a part. This God is often very difficult to understand.

In the works explored in this paper, the Book of Job, *J.B.*, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and *Night*, we see reactions that provide for many different relationships with God. Whether deemed friend or father, limited or limitless, He is both comfort and sorrow in times of suffering; and whether patriarch or savior, He is both question and answer. The characters and men in these works each question his motives and his silence as they undergo some of the most difficult trials of faith. For Job, his integrity is something he is not willing to sacrifice to justify his suffering. For J.B., the

love between God and man becomes the redeeming factor. For Kushner, God cannot be both loving and omnipotent if we are to suffer. And for Wiesel, there is nothing that can justify his experience in Auschwitz.

We find, through these works, that man must question God to be sure of his faith, and to do so while not losing faith is the key to understanding God's plan. For perhaps, it is not, as the saying goes, "That which does not kill you makes you stronger," but "That which does not kill your faith makes you stronger."

Chapter 1

The Problem of Justice in the Book of Job

The book of Job is perhaps the foremost document in the question of human suffering. As a part of the Biblical canon, this book holds authority for believers of Judaism and Christianity but acts as a point of contempt for many of the Bible's non-believers. It is a universal story that might not necessarily identify a specific man, Job, and his specific family but rather serves as a tool for exploration of the theme of incomprehensible suffering. Many of us can identify with Job, or even parts of Job, because many of us have struggled with God in the depths of pain. Moreover, as a universal symbol of the innocent victim, Job's struggle is one that has been interpreted in many different ways since its conception. But, nonetheless, the question of why the innocent must suffer continues to plague humanity. Through a closer look at Job's life, his experiences with his friends, his claims against God, and God's reaction to him, we can see more clearly the core of this issue and how the question of suffering and evil is answered by God of Israel.

The date of the book of Job is continually debated in the scholarly community, as research gives light to differing viewpoints of its history. Even though the book is set in pre-Mosaic times, the date of composition is much later (Crenshaw 863). In the Jewish Encyclopedia, scholars argue that the book, "discusses a religious problem which could scarcely have been formulated in the early period of the Israelitic people; for it presupposes a high spiritual development and a maturity of judgement which are acquired by a people only after great trials and sore tribulations" (196). Thus, this question must have come to the forefront "when the oppressed Israelite congregation presented a violent contrast to its wicked oppressors who were joined by traitors to their own religion and

people. This contrast is found in the Exile, but still more markedly perhaps at the time of the Maccabees, when Israel was persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes (2d cent. B.C.)” (Singer et al. 197). The suggestion of this date is contested, however, as many other scholars argue that the book should be placed between 600-300 B.C. (MacKenzie 511). This conclusion arises from the knowledge that the Babylonian exile and return occurred between 600-450 B.C., and “the preaching of Jeremiah and Ezekiel caused a crisis in the collectivistic ethics of the people of Israel” at that time (MacKenzie 511). In addition, one researcher states that the book must appear “prior to the third century B.C., when ‘Satan’ appears as a proper name” in other parts of the Bible (Bergant 233).

As the forerunner in the subject of suffering, whether or not Job was influenced by previous works is also debated in research. Biblical scholar Edwin M. Good says that Job is "unique in the ancient world, with no clear indications that its dialogue was influenced in style or form by...other works" (409). In the Jerome Biblical Commentary, however, R. A. F. MacKenzie comments otherwise:

The book has its forerunners in both Egyptian and Babylonian literature, notably in some dialogues dealing with problems of human life and the justice of the gods (Wisdom Lit, 28.12-31). The Israelite author may have been familiar with some of these. If so he surpassed them, both by his theology (monotheism and the transcendence of the God of Israel) and by his literary genius. (511)

In essence, Job is and was a much-needed composition for people of all kinds and at all times. As part of the wisdom literature, the book attempts to gather and express “the results of human experience as an aid toward understanding and solving the problems of life” (*Catholic Study Bible* 611). For the Jews, this work vocalized a question of God's ability and authority that had never before been recorded. The answer that God gives Job

enlightens their faith with an assessment of God's awesome plan in comparison to the limitations of human comprehension.

In Job's world, to have done something, anything, "wrong" would have merited his suffering. The orthodox tradition argues that God punishes people for their sins--that God's justice is based on reward and punishment. Today, many might claim that such justice is actually retribution and such retribution is not at all God-like but human-like. Moreover, even if someone had committed a sin against God, how can suffering be a measurable punishment? As humans, we wonder how any sin could ever equal the death of a loved one or the physical and emotional pain of cancer.

In the book, Job is painted with exaggerated innocence and devotion to show an extreme case in which God's justice would have obviously been warranted, according to the beliefs at that time. Job is based on the principles of justice that had been announced in Deuteronomy "according to which earthly happiness was promised as a reward to the faithful followers of the Law and of YHWH, and earthly misfortune was held up as a punishment to the recalcitrant" (Singer et al. 196-97). This idea follows from the Judaic belief, predominant during the postexilic period when Job was written (and still today for most Jews), that "there is no prize in heaven for running the race on earth," meaning that "the Jews did not believe in life after death" (Rohr 98). Thus, Jews focused on the present life as the arena for rewards and punishment (Rohr 99). As a result, "Over and over again, in the Book of Proverbs and in other wisdom literature, the Hebrew Scriptures promise that the upright will prosper and the wicked will suffer the consequences of their evil ways" (Rohr 99).

Despite this focus on the present, the traditional view encourages people to wait for what is coming to them, that justice will provide for their reward or punishment in due time on earth. The basic elements of the traditional view unfold as: “God protects the weak and punishes the wicked, just as a good human ruler does; God’s justice is analogous to Job’s own uprightness; and God also provides blessing to those who fear Him and serve Him” (Wilcox 11). Within these points, then, we see Job as a prime candidate for God’s prosperity, whether or not it will come now or later. Job’s issue with God is raised, however, when he is punished by God for some transgression which he believes he has not committed.

Job is a good man whom God has blessed with prosperity, and his goodness is illustrated so that he should be seen as the last person that God would punish. In the first verse, the author plainly states Job’s piety: “In the land of Uz there was a blameless and upright man named Job, who feared God and avoided evil” (1.1). Job even makes offerings for his children’s potential sins, as he says “ ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and blasphemed God in their hearts’ ” (1.5). Thus, as one who has done no wrong and gone above and beyond to do right, Job is the epitome of not only innocence but also devotion to his God. Even when Job’s children and his riches are taken from him, he keeps his faith, when, “In all this Job did not sin, nor did he say anything disrespectful of God” (1.22).

As a believer in the traditional viewpoint, Job at first shows complacent acceptance in the face of his loss, but his acceptance initially comes without any future expectation of reward. He says “Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I go back again” (1.21). Even after Job is inflicted with physical pain, he persists in

accepting his suffering, saying to his wife “We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?” (2.10). After Job has time to ponder and to digest what has happened, however, he becomes angry at the lack of justice that God has shown him. He falls out of his passivity to his life-long belief in the traditional view and realizes that he has done nothing to deserve his punishment. Alluding to this belief, he asks God: “Why is light given to the toilers, and life to the bitter in spirit?” (3.20). He becomes anxious for the justice he believes in, and for the next thirty-five chapters, Job continues to question God for plaguing him with such horrific suffering.

Because Job believes in his own innocence as well as God’s justice, he is distressed at the fate he has been given. Job’s three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—try to calm his anguish when they come to comfort him. For almost thirty-four chapters, they attempt to convince Job that he is to blame for his suffering and that he must repent to God instead of blame him. In chapter four, Eliphaz immediately replies to Job’s lament, saying, “Reflect now, what innocent person perishes? Since when are the upright destroyed?” (4.7). In Zophar’s first speech, he chastises Job for questioning God’s plan as he says, “Can you penetrate the designs of God? Dare you vie with the perfection of the Almighty?” (11.7). Bildad attempts to defend God and comfort Job by saying “Behold, God will not cast away the upright; neither will he take the hand of the wicked. Once more will he fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with rejoicing,” suggesting that justice will provide for Job’s restoration if he is truly good (8.20-21). An additional friend, Elihu, confronts Job when Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad have exhausted their attempts to convince him. “The chief points of Elihu’s speeches are that God is never wrong, that calamity is a warning from God to man to repent, that God, who

neither profits in man's righteousness nor suffers in his sins, always chastises the wicked and rewards the righteous" (Singer et al. 196). Elihu scolds Job for his complaints, offering the knowledge that "God is greater than man," and "far be it from God to do wickedness; far from the Almighty to do wrong!" (33.12, 34.10).

In short, to presume that God has been unjust is a chance that Job's three friends are not willing to take. But Job must defend his innocence, and the sincerity of his position is upheld by the fact that he is not looking for recompense but merely wants validation of his integrity. Job questions God's wrath against him, "Even though [God] knows that I am not wicked," and commands true justice as he cries, "Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus will he know my innocence!" (10.7, 31.6). In addition, he enumerates his good deeds in this speech and states that he might deserve God's punishment had he done otherwise. In the end, Job pleads with God to answer him when he says: "Oh that I had one to hear my case, and that my accuser would write out his indictment! Surely, I should wear it on my shoulder or put it on me like a diadem; of all my steps I should give him an account; like a prince I should present myself before him. This is my final plea; let the Almighty answer me" (31.35-37).

The Lord then answers, and he comes to Job, "out of the storm," sometimes phrased as a "whirlwind," an event that emphasizes the reasoning he gives to Job. He asks Job: "Have you entered into the sources of the sea, or walked about in the depths of the abyss? Have the gates of death been shown to you, or have you seen the gates of darkness? Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell me, if you know all" (38.16-18). In a series of questions similar to these, God continually confronts Job about how he can know or understand God's plan, suggesting a gap between God's plan and

human comprehension. Job is awed and humbled with this personal audience and spontaneous reaction from God, as he says, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered,” and goes on to disown his words and repent to God (42.2,6). At this point, many readers wonder why Job suddenly gives in; why does his outrage quickly turn to passivity? Perhaps, “The answer to Job’s question came in the form of a revelation; the God he was involved with was a mysterious person whose ways are not our ways. Thus, for Job the proper attitude in the face of undeserved suffering towards this God can only be one of humility and faith” (Sia 56).

Even more confusing to the some, though, is the restoration of Job and the wording of the Epilogue. While God scolds Job’s friends for “not [speaking] rightly concerning [him],” he seems to behave in quite the manner they had suggested as the book says, “the Lord restored the prosperity of Job, after he had prayed for his friends; the LORD even gave Job twice as much as he had before,” and, “Thus the lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his earlier ones” (Epilogue.10,12).

In Marian and Santiago Sia’s book *From Suffering to God*, they offer an explanation of God’s answer that seems to be an appropriate interpretation for the book: “Instead of a clear-cut reason for his suffering, Job is brought to an existential awareness of how he stands with God: the God who is wise enough and powerful enough to be able to govern the universe in all its complexity must be great enough to direct the course of human events” (25). This insight humbles Job, causing him to repent of his boldness in the face of the Almighty, as the Sias state, “[Job] withdraws his question because he has grasped that he is a creature and his destiny is well protected by this mysterious God who demands complete surrender on Job’s part” (25).

Nevertheless, many readers of the book of Job are prompted to wonder what kind of message this book teaches. To one who has borne much suffering, God's answer seems to evade the question. In *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, Oliver Leaman questions God's answer as he says, "Were I to have a servant and were I to mistreat him grievously, I am not sure that he would be satisfied if asked for a reason and told that I was stronger and cleverer than him" (22). But he then goes on to suggest that Job was not really looking for an answer but just some kind of response from God; the fact that God does respond is validation enough for him--it suggests that his case was worthy of some explanation. Thus we are left with a conclusion based on this reality:

Throughout the dialogue, Job has wanted to know, he has sought proof, that God is interested in him as an individual, that God is interested in his integrity. The very appearance of God, the very sound of his voice speaking to Job is the proof Job has been seeking. That God's power is immense emphasizes the wonder, the uniqueness, of God's coming to Job, to one man. If there is such a gap between man and God, what a wonder it is that God should speak to man at all. Job has the answer to his personal problem--God is his friend. (Gros Louis 264)

Chapter 2

J.B.: A Confrontation with the Book of Job

While the book of Job seems to be the forerunner in the problem of suffering, it has been constantly probed, questioned, and debated throughout history. Today, preachers continue to give sermons on Job's experience, scholars still debate the meaning of Job's confrontation with God, and writers incessantly refer to Job in their attempts to tell the stories of sufferers. One such author, Archibald MacLeish, in 1958, attempted to transform Job's story into a play in which the outcome of the biblical story is woven into an additional ending. MacLeish approaches the story from the viewpoint of the main character, J.B., after whom the play is named, and brings him through many of the same trials as Job, to the point where he loses his family and is physically afflicted with pain. He is challenged to react in a different way than Job does, however, and this reaction becomes a commentary on the God of Job and Job's ultimate response.

J.B. opens with two players, Nickles and Mr. Zuss—circus vendors who have been actors in years past. They have agreed to play the story of Job, from the viewpoint of heaven looking down on earth, but they go back and forth about who is to play which part in the parts of Satan and God. Nickles, the more cynical of the two, has been pegged for Satan by his friend Mr. Zuss, who eventually refers to him as a “very bitter man” (79). Nickles has much difficulty accepting God's treatment of Job, and thus, he fits the role of Satan as a devil's advocate of the Job story. Nickles is very disturbed by the suffering in the world, offering that chance plays just as large a part in our lives as any justice might. Both players see Job as a sort of everyman; Mr. Zuss admits that “there's always someone playing Job,” and Nickles says “Job is everywhere we go, his children dead, his work for nothing, counting his losses, scraping his boils, discussing himself with his

friends and physicians, questioning everything..." (80-81). Nickles, possibly jaded by his own luck in life so far, sees that Job's mistake is to expect justice: "Job wishes!—thinks there should be justice somewhere...Justice! In this cesspool! Think of it! Job knows better when it's over" (85). Nickles' idea—that there is no justice—becomes important in the end of the story when J.B., much like Job, begins to be restored by God.

As Mr. Zuss and Nickles don the masks of God and Satan, the scene changes to a family praying over their meal, all together for Thanksgiving dinner. Here, we are introduced to J.B. and his family, and we see the starkly different attitudes present between J.B. and his wife, Sarah. She is perhaps the most devout, but her fear of God almost brings her to the point of being paranoid. She is "nagged by a conscience that demands verbalized thanks and humility before God," and, "expresses the simple, conventional faith that, if man does his part, God will not forget" (Falk 141). At this meal, she focuses intently on giving thanks to God and harshly interrogates her children by asking: "Has any one of you thanked God? Really thanked Him?" (97). J.B. is a more jovial, carefree spirit, who shows a naïve but faithful love to his children; he sees them as innocent while Sarah holds them accountable for the reality of sin. J.B. says, "Children know the grace of God better than most of us. They see the world the way the morning brings it back to them, New and born and fresh and wonderful..." (99).

At this point, we begin to see the differences between J.B. and Job. In contrast to J.B., the original Job is a man who makes sacrifices and gives offerings for his children, in the case that one of them might have had even a sinful thought. In addition, J.B. does not seem to be as responsible as Job for his own goodness; rather he feels that he is blessed by God. He says that he has always known that "God was on my side, was good

to me” (103). As one of God’s favored children, Job is such because of his own will, his own actions, as stated in the very first verse: ““In the land of Uz there was a blameless and upright man named Job, who feared God and avoided evil” (Job 1.1). Job was not somehow blessed or chosen by God; he was a dutiful servant who earned his innocence not just by not disobeying God but by striving to do good works for God. J.B. takes a very different attitude about the God that he believes in. As Job seemed to have thought that his goodness might have merited God’s favor and certainly did not merit his punishment, J.B. says that God’s favor is “not a question of deserving” (105-106).

Consequently, J.B. believes that God’s favor is determined by something different than the human comprehension of reward and punishment. In J.B.’s encounter with Mr. Sullivan, he seems to suggest an unfair distribution of God’s goodness and appears to be cocky about being in God’s favor. When Mr. Sullivan asks him “Why do you get the best of the rest of us?,” Job’s reply is that “I get the best of you [because] it’s God’s country, Mr. Sullivan,” displaying his belief that God favors himself more than he does Mr. Sullivan (104-105). Then J.B. says “It isn’t luck when God is good to you, it’s something more,” alluding to a belief in Providence, that God’s will provides for the way his favor is given out (105). He says that the “something more” is something greater than himself and his own understanding—“some mysterious certainty of opulence” (105).

As a result, when J.B.’s wife tells him that he’s earned the right to trust in God’s goodness to him, he says, “Nonsense! We get the earth for nothing, don’t we? It’s given to us, gift on gift...,” asserting a belief in God’s goodness, founded only on his own life experience, though (108). J.B. shows an earnest trust in God as he says, “Of course [God’s] just...A man can count on Him. Look at the world, the order of it, the certainty

of day's return...that never cheated expectation" (107). One thing that J.B. fails to see here, though, is that God's justice has never cheated his own expectation, but it has undoubtedly failed that of others. This is a curious oversight for J.B., since he knows that he is blessed and believes he is somehow set apart by God. The reader's opinion of J.B.'s character must come into question at this point because we now realize that he apparently takes no account of that suffering which does not affect him. In a world in which a moral sense of obligation to one's neighbor is important, the readers see a completely different Job story emerging here. To be empathetic of J.B.'s suffering when he has not been so for others may not be very appealing to readers. Furthermore, when people like Mr. Sullivan have never been very lucky, we wonder what right J.B. has to complain if he falls out of God's favor. Must we feel sympathy for J.B. when he already has had more than many ever will and has done nothing to have deserved it? And does J.B. dare boast about the undeserved favor that God has bestowed on him? While some of these issues and questions can apply to Job as well, this work brings them to the forefront more so than the original Job story.

One possibility that might salvage our image of J.B. at this point requires us to imagine a relationship between man and God in which one elemental factor was not explored in the book of Job. Essentially, this factor could serve as the justification for J.B.'s trust in God and his belief that God's favor is much more than luck. Thus, this idea that is "much more" than anything J.B.'s neighbors can imagine, could be that J.B. knows of God's love for him and understands his own role in this bond. If J.B. finds love as a motivating factor for his attitude about life with his family, is it not possible to imagine that J.B.'s trust in God's goodness is determined by love? Perhaps this possibility comes

out most obviously when J.B. says to Sarah: “We love our life because it’s good: It isn’t good because we love it—Pay for it—in thanks or prayers. The thanks are part of love and paid like love: Free gift or not worth having” (108).

J.B.’s reasoning, then, could come from a deeper relationship with God, one that was not completely manifested between Job and God. While Job learned of God’s friendship for him, the readers of Job are not aware of any implications of what this means for Job’s future, besides his reward. For J.B., his restoration allows him to feel and know human and divine love, an ability that is not as apparent in the end of Job.

Sarah, however, has much difficulty understanding J.B.’s carefree attitude and trust in God’s love. As mentioned earlier, Sarah is highly conscious of what God is doing for them and how much he has blessed them, and she feels guilty and afraid that she and her family have not thanked him enough. While Job’s wife only plays the part to have given him children and discourage him from his faith as she tells him to “curse God and die,” Sarah encourages Job in his faith in the beginning chapters (Job 2.9). Her devotion appears to be a bit extreme, however, as she constantly focuses on her fear that they might lose what they have, instead of partaking in the joy of life with her family. In her calculations of how thankful they should be and of how much they are indebted to God for what he has given them, Sarah tells Job “We *owe*,” and insists that God’s goodness is a question of deserving (101). At one point, she says “You can trust your luck because you’ve earned the right to trust it: earned the right for all of us to trust it” (108). Here, she displays her belief in the traditional idea of reward and punishment that is so important to the reasoning of Job’s three friends—Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad. But what might J.B. have done to earn such a right? We have no idea of his innocence, unlike the descriptions

we get of Job. As we have already discussed why he believes he should be in God's favor, we have no understanding of why Sarah should be so sure of his reward, except only to assume that J.B. is as righteous as Job. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the traditional theology that she has adopted, we see that her fears are more rational than we might have originally thought because J.B. is utterly unaware of how much he should owe to God, according to this belief.

When the first scene with J.B. and his family is finished, we come back to "heaven" with a comment from Mr. Zuss (God) to Nickles (Satan): "Well, that's our pigeon" (112). With comments like this one, the presence of Mr. Zuss and Nickles in the places of God and Satan seems to almost ridicule God's character and intentions. Here, MacLeish emphasizes, or makes it seem as if, God is whimsical, turning people's fates over to Satan as he chooses. Moreso, Nickles and Zuss seem to have a more thought-provoking and rational discussion about the fate of J.B. than God and Satan do in Job's situation. In the beginning, Nickles is troubled by the way the story goes, and he asks Zuss, "why must [J.B.] suffer...?" (116). Zuss' answer is "To praise!" but Nickles says that he already praises; Nickles then gives his own answer: "To learn!... suffering teaches!" but Zuss argues that J.B. will not learn from his suffering because he is being tested by God (116-117). Zuss says that the point to the test is so that J.B. can "See God"; Nickles, again, is unhappy with his explanation (118).

As the story proceeds to unfold with the tragedies that strip J.B. of his children, the relationship between J.B. and Sarah becomes more strained and tense. In an overwhelmingly human response, Sarah immediately asks what the children had done to deserve their fate and what she and J.B. had done to bear such grief. J.B. recites Job's

thought: “Shall we take the good and not the evil?” but Sarah is only angered by this thought, much like Job’s wife in the bible story. As each of his children are killed, J.B. remains curiously, and almost passively, faithful to God, and he even says “Blessed be the name of the Lord,” when his last child’s life is taken (158). Nickles is angry and displeased with J.B. at this instance; he is disgusted by the fact that J.B. would praise God for all the suffering he’s been sent (161).

J.B. must face the reality of their tragedy through Sarah’s questions and anger, which eventually prompts him to develop his own feelings of confusion and outrage. He acknowledges that “His will is everywhere against us—Even in our sleep, our dreams...,” and tries to hold on and reassert his beliefs that “God will not punish without cause,” that “God is just,” but Sarah refuses to let him ignore what has befallen them (176-177). She says, “I will not stay here if you lie—connive in your destruction, cringe to it: Not if you betray my children...I will not stay to listen...They are dead and they were innocent: I will not let you sacrifice their deaths to make injustice justice and God good!” (178). Here, some might suggest that Sarah shows more human integrity than her husband when she refuses to believe that her children’s deaths were inflicted on them by a just God. But J.B. persists that we have to be guilty of our sin and bear suffering as a punishment, for “God is unthinkable if we are innocent” (179). When Sarah leaves as a result and J.B. realizes that she is gone, he breaks down with confusion and uncertainty as he laments to God to show him his guilt.

In this scene, J.B.’s faith in God shows an unfaltering loyalty as he wishes to bear guilt that he does not feel or know. Because his children have all been killed and he has been afflicted with physical pain, J.B. reasons that he must bear these sufferings as part of

God's will, and as such, he tries to accept them. In the book of Job, Job tried to be faithful as well, but even under pressure from his friends, he tries to uphold his integrity; Job insists on his innocence. J.B. shows a child-like innocence because he trusts that God must know what he is doing, much like a child trusts in his father. Again, we might conclude that his trust is based on a love that Job was not fully aware of, but we might also suggest that J.B. clings to his trust in God through a reluctance to accuse God of injustice.

The three friends that come to visit J.B. give him quite a different type of comfort than Job's friends. While Job's friends tried to blame him for the suffering he was experiencing, J.B.'s comforters try to talk him out of his guilt. Eliphaz says, "There is no guilt, my man. We are all victims of our guilt, not guilty," and they all try to slough off J.B.'s suffering as part of chance (191). Bildad comments that "History is justice!—time inexorably turned to truth!...At the end there will be justice—Justice for all!" and tells J.B. that his suffering—the suffering of one man—is nothing to worry about (189). These rationalizations anger J.B., though, as he seeks a valid reason for his suffering; to suggest that God cannot worry about the suffering of a single man deeply offends him. Nevertheless, Zophar says that his sin was to be born a man, which is no greater sin than any other man has committed, and so, he must accept his suffering like any other man (194). But J.B. persists in his convictions—he wants to know his sin. Only this knowledge will justify his suffering.

The play follows the biblical text in J.B.'s call to God for an answer and the appearance of God to acknowledge his concerns. Thus, God visits J.B. and gives him the answer that he gave Job—that J.B. cannot ever know or understand the enormity of

God's plan. J.B. accepts this answer from God and humbly repents to him, embarrassed by his boldness in the face of the divinity. At this point, the original story would be coming to a close, but the players in the play must go on to make sense of what has happened.

Nickles is angered by J.B.'s repentance, accusing him of being a worm and a sheep "without the spunk to spit on Christmas" (204). This accusation is worthy of attention, as Nickles is probably not the only person to wonder why the Job-character does not insist on a direct answer to his question. Nickles says "God always wins," because such a reply to J.B.'s lament permits God to be the only person who will ever know all the answers (205). For J.B., in his faith, however, this answer meets his expectations of God—as the all-knowing and all-powerful. And Mr. Zuss recognizes this fact when he says that J.B. repented not out of the fear of God but of his own will, "as though [J.B.'s] suffering were justified, not by the Will of God but [J.B.'s] acceptance of God's Will" (207).

As many debate whether or not J.B. can actually be described as a modern-day Job (the comparison shows almost as many differences as similarities), the most important message from this play is not J.B.'s similarities to Job but the message conveyed by the last scene of the play. In this scene, instead of portraying a happily-ever-after version of Job's restoration, we see J.B. being reunited with his wife, but she has insightful answers for the suffering he has endured. J.B. is challenged by Nickles, now playing the part of Satan more than ever, to commit suicide and reject the restoration that God offers him, but he chooses life as Sarah comes back to him. He says to her,

“Why did you leave me alone?” and she answers him: “I loved you. I couldn’t help you any more. You wanted justice and there was none—only love” (219).

Here, we see a return to that element which was so essential to J.B.’s attitude about God and life in the beginning of the story. Through his experiences since that important Thanksgiving meal, J.B. has lost the realization of what was most important in his life, but Sarah brings it back to him. The word, the idea of love is not emphasized in the book of Job, but for J.B., love is the only thing that can transcend his suffering.

The element of love, though, is perhaps the most challenging question one can pose to God in time of suffering. Many of us are forced to wonder how a loving God can treat his children with such abuse. While J.B. is not directly painted innocent like Job, he is nonetheless a god-fearing man who loves him in his heart. But the love of God is the answer that MacLeish wants us to understand: “In a discussion of the biblical *Job* published in the *Christian Century*, he argued that a primary message of the book is God’s need to prove that man can love him for love’s own sake and not as a *quid pro quo*” (Roston 349-351). With this idea, we see that the need for a justification of suffering should not and cannot be greater than the power of love. MacLeish says, “Without man’s love God does not exist as God, only as creator, and love is the one thing no one, even God himself can command” (qtd. in Roston 350). Thus, J.B.’s triumph in the end shows the power and strength of love—to last through the most tested and trying times. Ultimately, we find that “It is man alone who can prove that man loves God; only man, by his persistence, can overcome Satan, of the kingdom of death, and love God, of the kingdom of life. Without man’s love, God is only a creator” (Falk 148).

While MacLeish's play is a common companion to an exploration of the book of Job, the use of J.B. in this paper is to demonstrate one of the reactions—a very head-on reaction—to God's answer to suffering as stated in the book of Job. "J.B. expresses the human capacity for suffering and, in spite of the inexplicable, the strength to continue to live and to love..." (Falk 148). Moreover, because J.B. is a direct commentary on Job, the play must and does make a powerful and meaningful statement about God's justice. MacLeish gives new insight into the question of human suffering and forces us to think about the meaning and reality of a loving God.

Chapter 3

Rabbi Kushner: The Limitations of a Loving God

In our discussion of the question of suffering within a belief in God, we have come to two viewpoints thus far. The first, the Old Testament story of Job, gives us the image of God's greatness and the majesty of his creation as something which we cannot ever understand; the second, the drama of J.B., shows that one can embrace life through a recognition and dependency on love, both human and divine, in the face of unexplained, or unjustifiable, suffering. Within these conclusions, however, several points must be examined to understand the ramifications of these decisions. In his article "Risking a happy ending" in *Christian Century*, Martin B. Copenhaver makes one such point when he suggests that "It is difficult to imagine Job pressing such questions in the midst of prosperity and happiness—after all, we tend to accept the good that happens to us as a matter of course" (923). Job and J.B. both try to recognize this fact, however, when their suffering begins by saying, "Shall we...take the good and not the evil? We have to take the chances...Evil with Good," but this recognition is overwhelmed by the mix of emotions that result from their tragedies (MacLeish 139). Nevertheless, it is this risk that both must take again in the end, as Copenhaver points out: "For Job to resume his life as it was before is to risk losing it all again. To have twice as much as before is to double the risk. To embrace his wife is to embrace life, in spite of potential suffering and unanswered questions" (923).

Thus, we see that the reality of suffering stirs even the most devout believers to question, but moreso, to reconcile their questions with their God. For many in the twentieth century, the ancient experience of Job or the fictional character in J.B. do not offer as many answers as their authors might have hoped. Some could possibly see them

as unrealistic and unfair to one's present reality—the here and now. As writer Elie Wiesel suggests, “Whatever we say about Job could have been said anytime about Job, by him or by his friends. It is because we come after Job and his friends that it has special emphasis” (Cargas 106). However human they might be, the reality of suffering can bring their answers into question for even the most highly obedient and loving servants of God, just as Copenhaver suggests—that such answers were good enough when life was good enough.

For one such man, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, the basis of his belief in God is challenged when his son is diagnosed with a rare disease, progeria, which causes him to die at a very young age. Kushner is troubled at the idea that the God he has grown up with and believed in—trusted in—all his life could ever will his innocent child to suffer. For this devout rabbi, the love that was so transcendent of suffering in J.B. is what causes a direct clash with the suffering his family must endure. Kushner struggles with the question of how a loving and omnipotent God can allow suffering in the lives of his children.

The challenge of labeling a God that allows suffering as an all-powerful and loving Creator is one that perhaps presents the largest difficulty in accepting and reconciling God and suffering. So great is “the threat presented by the reality of evil to the belief in an all-good and almighty God,” that “It is regarded as a stumbling-block to theistic belief and has therefore led to some people denying God's existence.” (Sia 55) In his article “Lust for Life and the Bitterness of Job,” J. Gerald Janzen identifies three possibilities that one must face to reconcile an idea of God with innocent suffering:

- (1)The innocent aren't all that innocent.
- (2)God is good and loving, but limited in power.

(3) God's power is limited, but the jury is still out on God's goodness.
(153)

In his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Kushner explores these characteristics of God in order to rationalize the image of his God with the God that has brought such tragedy into his family. To come to an understanding of God, Kushner tells his own story, as well as the stories of many he has come into contact with as a Rabbi. He develops his own theory on God and suffering by approving one of Janzen's three statements, which brings him to a conclusion that is wholly different from Job's answer from God in the Bible—and perhaps exactly the opposite.

Kushner had grown up with the same philosophy as Job had expected—that the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished. But when the Rabbi's son is diagnosed with such a terrible fate, his philosophy is immediately crushed because he believes that his son, as a child, is inherently innocent: "...on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three-year-old" (2). Kushner defines the turning point in his belief when he says, "Then came that day in the hospital when the doctor told us about Aaron and explained what progeria meant. It contradicted everything I had been taught" (3). At this point, Kushner's vision of God changes as his son, an innocent person, and his family, devout and obedient believers, must bear inconceivable suffering. Nevertheless, he turns outside of his family and his own experience to try to explain why suffering cannot be punishment from God. He says "that each of us can, without too much difficulty, think of things he has done which he should not have done," and thus, "we can always find grounds for justifying what happens to us," pointing out that this traditional theory is still present in today's methods

of thinking (10). But Kushner gives adequate logic to support that such thinking cannot be supported:

The idea that God gives people what they deserve, that our misdeeds cause our misfortune, is a neat and attractive solution to the problem of evil at several levels, but it has a number of serious limitations. As we have seen, it teaches people to blame themselves. It creates guilt even where there is no basis for guilt. It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves. And most disturbing of all, it does not even fit the facts. (10)

Consequently, Janzen's first possibility—that the innocent aren't all that innocent—is not grounds for suffering, as Kushner demonstrates that God cannot possibly be using suffering for the purpose of punishment. Kushner's focus then targets not the fact that the innocent are unjustly punished through suffering but that a loving and omnipotent God allows it.

In his journey to an explanation, Kushner comes to some common rationalizations that many people have used to dismiss suffering. He takes issue with many of these theories, as he argues that they are only meant to defend God and make others feel better about someone else's suffering. Kushner discusses how people often say that God inflicts suffering upon us for a reason, and he is rightly angered and offended at this possibility. Not only does he have trouble understanding this idea in his own experience, he also recounts the story of a woman named Helen as someone who cannot fathom what reason God might have for inflicting her with multiple sclerosis (23). Kushner also questions the idea that God does not give us more of a burden than we can bear; he says that he has seen men crack under the strain (26). He also concludes that whatever may come out of the suffering, as the reason for which God sent it, cannot be a noble justification for it: "Belief in a world to come where the innocent are compensated for their suffering can help people endure the unfairness of life in this world without losing

faith. But it can also be an excuse for not being troubled or outraged by injustice around us, and not using our God-given intelligence to try to do something about it” (29).

Like Job and J.B., though, Kushner’s conclusions present the reader with many ramifications to ponder before accepting his thesis. In an article called “Healing the Spirit: A Jewish Approach,” Nancy Flam, a rabbi as well, comments on experiences in which she has seen suffering bring secular Jews back to their relationship with God. She speaks of one woman who has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer and says, “For this woman, prayer, study, ritual, and holy relationship became the focus of her life; she could finally develop her spirituality at a time when it was clear her body would not be healed” (489). She also recounts the story of a man who had been diagnosed with prostate cancer: “Although many people, understandably would not share his feelings, he would not have traded his cancer for anything; it had provided him an opportunity to change his life in profoundly positive ways” (489). So we see here a reality of the potential for a reason for suffering, but as Kushner might argue, such is not always the case. For the two people that Flam discusses, they have had the opportunity to see and experience life; for Kushner’s son, he has not had the opportunity to experience life without progeria. The idea that his son could be compensated for the burdens of his disease, or that his family could be compensated for the shortened and often painful life of the child, is too troubling a thought for Kushner and readers alike.

The theory that “Everything happens for a reason,” however, is ingrained in a more fundamental belief about God (Hauser 17). From his experience as professor of theology and director of the master’s programs in theology, ministry and spirituality at Creighton University (Omaha, Nebraska), Richard J. Hauser has formulated much insight

on this belief, as well as many of the other problems on which Kushner reflects in his book. For Hauser, the tragedy of two drunk-driving incidents, killing six students at his university, has brought him to understand how many perceive the role of suffering within faith, and the assumptions that must be made to hold such beliefs. He argues that the assumption that must be taken with accepting suffering as part of God's plan is that "God is the direct cause of all that happens in the world," and therefore, that God directly causes our suffering (17). In relation to the tragedy on his campus, Hauser then asks, "Were we to conclude that God had used the drivers of the automobiles to carry out God's Providence? I wondered how these unfortunate individuals and their families... felt about being used by God in this way" (17). As a family member of one who is suffering, Kushner cannot accept that God is using his son or his family in such a way.

For Rabbi Kushner, we see his rejection of the compensation-theory, then, could also be rooted in his rejection of God as an all-powerful being—the belief that allows him to accept his suffering and forms the thesis of the book. Kushner arrives at this conclusion first by rejecting another of the three possibilities mentioned earlier—that God is not so good, and by doing this, he has only one possibility left—that God is limited in his power. To believe in God the father, the shepherd, the creator, the friend, Kushner cannot believe that God is not loving or does not care about his family, but he can find some comfort in the face of suffering if he can believe that God has not caused it. Kushner suggests, "Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us?... Could it be that 'How could God do this to me?' is the wrong question to ask?" (30).

To believe that God is limited in power could be to reject the God of Job, one who whose power was too enormous to know or comprehend. Rabbi Kushner explores the book of Job, though, to justify his philosophy about God and comes up with “three statements which everyone in the book, and most of the readers, would like to be able to believe,”(37); these are the same three possibilities that Janzen identifies in his article. And Kushner points out, as Copenhaver did, that “As long as Job is healthy and wealthy, we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no difficulty,” but when Job suffers, “we can now affirm any two only by denying the third” (37).

Like J.B., Kushner must accept God as a loving God, as a father who takes care of his children. Job’s picture of God, however, is more focused on the patriarchal-type image of the Old Testament God, one who punishes and rewards like a father who is first and foremost a disciplinarian. Job accepts God’s power over his suffering possibly because he does not have to accept his love as a basis for his belief, although we cannot know exactly what his faith or feelings were ultimately, internally based on. J.B., in contrast, accepts God as loving and all-powerful but rejects that his own innocence merits anything special, while his position as a favored child of God does.

Kushner’s assessment of the Job story is precisely what he has rejected to make his point. He says, “The moral of the story is: when hard times befall you, don’t be tempted to give up your faith in God. He has reasons for what he is doing, and if you hold on to your faith long enough, He will compensate you for your suffering” (33). Because this compensation-theory draws on God’s almightiness for validity, Kushner seems to reject Job as a source of comfort for his pain in rejecting God’s omnipotence. But, as we find later in his book, he interprets God’s answer to Job to support his idea,

through what he calls “the most important lines in the entire book,” chapter 40, verses 9-14 (43). Here, God says to Job: “Have you an arm like God? Can you thunder with a voice like his? You tread down the wicked where they stand... Then I will acknowledge that your own right hand can give you victory.” In this verse, Kushner finds a new twist to what God is saying: “I take these lines to mean ‘if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it,’” and then concludes that “God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can’t bring that about” (43).

Hauser also argues that if suffering is directly caused by God—that the drivers of the automobiles were used to carry out God’s Providence—then “human freedom and responsibility are limited by God’s plan” (17). Does this give more weight to Kushner’s position? Possibly. But the biblical story of Adam and Eve shows that human free will is not controlled by God and moreover, that our own human choices can bring about our own suffering. In the end of Janzen’s article, he refuses to approve any of the possibilities that he has offered. Janzen offers an answer that is a total rebuttal of Kushner’s point.

Janzen points out that Job, in his grief, “is drawn onto God’s knee and addressed about this world. And he is given to know that this world in all its dynamic and sometimes rambunctious liveliness is not outside the care and nurture and control of God” (160). Janzen feels that Job is comforted by God’s words and his presence. More striking though is Janzen’s understanding of God’s relationship to suffering:

I myself now take it that Job finally hears what he longed to hear, and sees what he in his suffering had not been able to see—that God is vitally concerned with bringing into being all the life of creation, and with nurturing and sustaining it in all its appetitive zest; that God takes a

terrible risk of creating a world whose vital forces enjoy enough freedom for the possibility of evil and even wickedness to occur; and that God is profoundly opposed to wickedness, not with the force of a divine ruler who coerces goodness by an undeviating feedback loop of strict rewards and punishments, but simply with truth, by exposing wickedness to the light of the morning sun. (Janzen 160)

Through Janzen's explanation, we can believe in an all-powerful God that does not want us to suffer, but by the inevitability of his creation, suffering is unleashed on the world. For Janzen, we do not have to accept that people are not deserving of God's favor or that God is unloving and limited in power; we only must accept that our world was made with "vital forces" that "enjoy enough freedom for the possibility of evil and even wickedness to occur" (160). With this theory, instead of someone's life or death being a decision that God has chosen, their fate is a product of forces of the world that God has created.

For the world to continue to spin, for civilization to continue to evolve, the forces of nature must continue. But does this argument mean that God cannot control what his forces have set in motion? Kushner says that "laws of nature treat everyone alike," and "God does not reach down to interrupt the workings of laws of nature to protect the righteous from harm" (58). When a loved one is dying, though, the fact that God does not want to disturb creation to save him or her is not very comforting.

Kushner justifies randomness as part of God's plan, acknowledging that there is randomness in the universe, but his randomness is totally separate from God's creation. While he recognizes the forces of nature, he will not defend such forces when human lives are affected. Kushner argues that randomness is out of God's control by giving examples of times when people are supposedly saved by God and other times when they

are taken in very harsh and brutal ways; he questions how God can save one and not the other.

Kushner refers to creation to support his argument, as he wonders, “Suppose that Creation, the process of replacing chaos with order, were still going on?” (52). He argues that “randomness is another name for chaos,” and that chaos is evil “because by causing tragedies at random, it prevents people from believing in God’s goodness” (53). Kushner toys with not only the ideas that the world is evolving toward more chaos or toward rule and order, but also the idea that God finished creation and “left the rest to us” as a sort of “residual chaos” (55). This idea is not altogether different from Janzen’s solution, with the exception that one believes in God’s power over the chaos while the other does not.

Kushner’s theory that God is not all-powerful is the only way that he can accept what has happened to him. Whether or not everyone adheres to his theory, we must admire his recognition of his human feelings and his refusal to believe that God is anything but good. Thus, in the face of his suffering, in the most terrible time in his life, he defends his God’s goodness and his son’s innocence with the same fervor. Such fervor strengthens him in his suffering and helps him rise beyond the question of “why did this happen?” to “what do I do now that it has happened?” (71).

Chapter 4

Elie Wiesel: Nothing Justifies the Holocaust

Many times, the question of suffering is addressed in ways of very personal, intimate suffering—through the stories and experiences of individuals, requiring the thoughts and rationalizations of individuals and emphasizing the struggles of individuals. But an exploration of suffering in the world often requires the element of a group perspective, as we know the term “social injustice” is used quite often when referring to the mistreatment or misfortune of an ethnic group, a religious group, a nation or a country. Throughout history, we know of many groups who have suffered, mostly at the hands of their fellow humans. In America, the pride of democracy is scarred by the experiences of Native American Indians and African Americans in their struggles for rights and equality. One of the most massive struggles of a group or nation in recent history is inarguably the experience of European Jews in the Holocaust. At the mercy of Hitler’s hopes for German racial purity, the Jews suffered in many ways.

As a group, they lost sources and centers of their tradition and history. They lost potential leaders and members of their community—six million of them total. They lost an entire generation of young people who were killed but also many whose spirits were killed by what they saw and felt. Individually, European Jews suffered the losses of loved ones, often their entire families. They suffered the physical pains of hunger and thirst, the torture of endless mindgames, the horror of physical abuse, and the humiliation of being stripped of their identities.

These people suffered tremendously, yet the Jewish faith is still alive in Europe. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, tells of his experience in Auschwitz in his book *Night*, and in it, he questions the God who has allowed this to happen. Through his experience

as an individual, he speaks for all Jews; he carries the testimony of their fate and the duty of bearing witness to their suffering. Wiesel says: “When I say ‘I,’ I speak as a Jew because I am Jewish and I assume the entire destiny of my people from beginning to now...when the Jew is Jewish he speaks on behalf of everybody” (Cargas 8). Today, Wiesel is still a practicing, believing Jew. How has he been able to reconcile his faith? And how have many members of the Jewish community been able to do so?

Questions of God’s justice with Elie’s story begin with the fact that his deportation occurred in the spring of 1944. For many Americans, this time is viewed as the beginning of hope that the war would be over. For many Jews, this began an intensification of the Nazi war against them. At this time, the exterminations were heightened because the Nazi mission was under attack. Hitler and his forces could not accept the idea that they could be stopped before they had achieved their goal. In some last ditch efforts, acts that demonstrated nothing but pure evil and hatred, they tried to finish what they started, leaving no traces, no witnesses, behind. At a time when their soldiers could have perhaps been used elsewhere, Hitler and his Nazi forces concentrated their efforts on the elimination of the Jews from civilization.

Wiesel invokes human accountability in his *Memoirs* when he says: “The free world, including Jewish leaders in America and Palestine, had known since 1942, but we knew nothing [of Hitler’s plans for the Final Solution]. Why didn’t they warn us?” (63). While Wiesel has no intentions of reducing the accountability of the killers, he is struck by the passivity of his fellow human beings around the world. “How many of our people would have escaped the enemy if Roosevelt, Churchill...and the leading lights of world Jewry had issued radio appeals: ‘Hungarian Jews, don’t let yourselves be locked into

ghettos, don't get into the cattle cars! Flee..." (*Memoirs* 63). Wiesel argues that inherent Jewish optimism allowed his people to believe the Nazi promises of resettlement. If they had known the reality or had been warned of the unfathomable treatment they would receive, they might have been able to save themselves.

Wiesel has taken up his duty to tell his story and the stories of his people through many of his published works, beginning with *Night* in 1958. One of his only autobiographical works, this book relays his test of faith and his own internal struggle in the face of true evil, manifested in the horrors of concentration camp life. In *Night*, Wiesel recounts his experiences as a Jewish child in the Hungarian town of Sighet, which became a part of Romania for several years during his childhood. He tells of the changes that occur with the war and the rise of anti-Semitism and finally the deportation of Hungarian Jews. His story of life in Auschwitz is carefully but concisely recounted to give a profound testimony to the suffering of his people, his family, and himself.

Through *Night* and Wiesel's *Memoirs*, he shares stories of his childhood and conveys an understanding of the growth of his mentality and an important image of the fifteen-year-old Jewish boy who was sent to Auschwitz. In the Foreword of *Night*, written by Wiesel's good friend Francois Mauriac, we see the importance of this understanding when he says, "The child who tells us his story here was one of God's elect. From the time when his conscience first awoke, he had lived only for God and had been reared on the Talmud, aspiring to initiation into the Kabala, dedicated to the Eternal" (ix). As a student of Jewish mysticism, Elie strived for the highest level of faith and understanding in God: "Within [the Kabala's] gates, higher than heaven, prayer and meditation are driven to their limits and allow apprehension of the mystery of human

power as manifested in good and evil alike” (*Memoirs* 35). The purpose of these studies was that through intense prayer and meditation, Satan would become powerless and humanity would be saved—humanity would enter “the light and joy of truth” (*Memoirs* 35). It is this part of Wiesel that seems so crucial to the path that he has taken in all of his writings. As a witness of both true good and ultimate evil in the world, Wiesel arrives at the importance of questions and exploration, as he finds that precise answers are not something we are likely to attain.

In his first experiences with anti-Semitism, Wiesel “accepted outbreaks of anti-Jewish hatred as endemic to our condition” (*Memoirs* 19). Regardless of this belief, Wiesel presents the question typical to human thinking of why such hatred must occur. His teachers’ responses were found in stories of the Bible, especially in the story of Abraham—“a better Jew than you”—in which they deny him the right to ask why. They tell young Elie that Abraham and the other patriarchs were innocent and devout but they suffered terrible fates, “And you dream of living your life without suffering?” (*Memoirs* 19). Consequently, Elie, and much of the Jewish community, expected and endured their suffering as a part of their heritage, their history, and their identity. The Jews, as well as the entire world, could never have fathomed the enormity of suffering that would become a part of their identity as a result of the Holocaust.

In *Night*, Wiesel tells of the developments in his community that eventually led up to their deportation—events which could never have forewarned them of their future in the hands of the Nazis. He uses very few words to convey the emotions of himself and those in the community around him, but these few words are very powerful and tend to capture an exact image for the reader. When the Germans arrived in Sighet, he says

“Anguish. German soldiers—with their steel helmets, and their emblem, the death’s head” (*Night* 7). With these words, we feel the pain of sudden occupation and the doom of what this occupation would eventually mean to Wiesel. In his fond memories of those days, Wiesel recounts proudly how the community banded together, how their solidarity became their only stronghold. He says, “To the very last moment, a germ of hope stayed alive in our hearts” (*Night* 13). As one who is looking back on this experience, this statement means much more than pride in what they were doing; it seems to say “Look at what type of people they were—unselfish, loving, undeniably good,” almost like Job, except they were not nearly as prosperous or blessed with fortune. Through this statement, Wiesel resonates his sadness at the fates that were ahead of these people and the fact that, in spite of such impending doom, they held on to hope.

Wiesel remembers the evacuation of the ghettos with even more irony: “There was joy—yes, joy. Perhaps they thought that God could have devised no torment in hell worse than that of sitting there among the bundles, in the middle of the road, beneath a blazing sun; that anything would be preferable to that” (*Night* 14). Yet, he sees the torment in their souls as he adds, “In everyone’s eyes was suffering drowned in tears” (*Night* 14). As Wiesel and his own family are evacuated, this innocent, devout child begins to experience evil as he had never before seen or known. He recalls the police that forced them out: “They were the first of the faces of hell and death” (*Night* 17). And so begins Wiesel’s experience with suffering, with injustice. As a fifteen-year-old boy, Wiesel learns the face of evil and feels the impact of this experience within the depths of his soul—within his faith.

At this time, Wiesel remembers the remainders of hope, that maybe the deportations would be better than the ghettos, but soon his people learn the truth as they are packed into cattle cars and threatened with immediate death if they try to escape. Then, the young Eliezer, the intense pursuer of God's salvation and grace, finds the antithesis of everything he has ever believed in when the train stops at a place called Auschwitz. Their arrival and unloading from the cattle cars presents an eerie stillness in which we get some sense of the despair that was wrenching the souls of each person on that train. Wiesel, looking back on his arrival at Auschwitz, sees the separation of the men and women as a life-changing event in which he will never see his mother and younger sister again. While this is not what he experienced at the time, this is the only remembrance that his memory now allows. At this point, he finds himself alone with his father and soon understands that he must be willing to fight for his survival. As they come into contact with 'veterans' of the camps, they are greeted with fury at their ignorance: "You'd have done better to have hanged yourselves where you were than come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you at Auschwitz? Haven't you heard about it? In 1944?" (*Night* 28).

The feelings of members of his community were mixed at this time. Some wanted revolt, but the elders insisted that they remain faithful and, as always, hopeful. Wiesel remembers their argument: "You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head..." (*Night* 29). But we see young Elie's experience as something that is beyond his control; he cannot help being affected by what he sees, smell, and hears at the sight of the crematoria in the camp. Horror and disbelief grip him, and all that he has studied or learned about God could not have ever prepared him for what he would see

and feel. Perhaps the most powerful passage in *Night* is his description of this experience. With the same careful, concise selection of words, Wiesel shares his thoughts at that time:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (*Night* 32)

Through this passage, Wiesel conveys a profound contemplation of his horror, after several years of being a silent survivor. He chooses religious images, such as the number seven, an important number used throughout the bible, and the wreaths of smoke, pictured as halos for those children whose lives are taken, to show how this experience haunts him. He also focuses on silence in this passage: the silence of the sky, perhaps meant to symbolize the silence of the world, and the nocturnal silence, which bears down on him and forces him to be contained to watching the atrocities around him. Most of all, he is upset by the peculiar silence of his God, and it is this silence which seems to kill his spirit in Auschwitz.

In the face of such terror and at the mercy of such thoughts, however, Wiesel says, “I have never renounced my faith in God” (*Memoirs* 84). But what does it mean to say that the flames consumed his faith? that those moments murdered his God and his soul as well? For Wiesel, his struggle with the atrocities against his people and the suffering they endured is fully involved in his pursuit of faith. He says, “I have risen

against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it” (*Memoirs* 84).

While we must recognize that human free will was directly responsible for what happened during the Holocaust, the question of responsibility still leaves God with an indirect role as the Creator of humanity. His silence within this role is what Wiesel questions most. Again, though, we must wonder, can God, in his principle of free will with which Adam and Eve committed the first sins, change the course of events as he sees fit? As in Kushner’s conclusions, we wonder, does this make him more powerful or less powerful? Basically, to question God’s silence is to hold God accountable for human will, which in effect seems only logical when, as Creator, he should be ultimately responsible. Moreover, added into this discussion are massive tragedies like earthquakes and tornadoes, which are not at all caused by free will. In Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, for example, an entire town suffers from an unexplainable disease that leaves as mysteriously as it comes, and the characters struggle with this occurrence of evil that unleashes itself on even the most innocent among them, on their children. In this situation, the inhabitants of the town are forced to wonder who else can be responsible but God. In addition, although we can clearly see Jewish suffering during the Holocaust as a result of human choices—Adolph Hitler, Nazi philosophy and propaganda, the machinations of the death camps, the passivity of the outside world, etc.—how can God let free will get this far out of human decency? We are tempted to think that this might have been a situation where God should have mediated human actions.

For Wiesel, the atrocities of Auschwitz are ingrained deep in his soul and his mind as events that destroyed his innocence and brought him to new conclusions about

the world around him. As we have seen in the reactions of Job, J.B., and Kushner, the human reaction to suffering takes on a different shape and meaning in each case. Job and J.B. attempt to defend God and hold on to their beliefs about him, but when they have had time to consider the meaning of their suffering in the wake of their innocence, they begin to question God. Kushner's confusion, though, seems much more immediate, as does his attempt to find an explanation for what is happening to him. Wiesel's approach is somewhat different. While he does have an immediate reaction somewhat like Kushner, he knows that there can be no answer for what has happened at Auschwitz, that "Nothing justifies Auschwitz" (*Memoirs* 105). His life, his search for meaning, and his faith in God all have a different turn because of it. In the camp, Wiesel says, "Some talked of God, of his mysterious ways...But I had ceased to pray. How I sympathized with Job! I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute Justice" (*Night* 42).

Wiesel's fundamental faith in God and his respect for the Jewish beliefs, even while he struggled with them in Auschwitz, are they keys to his continued life today, the keys to understanding how he can still believe in God and still practice his faith. To give up on his faith now would be to let the Nazis have the final victory; to let them destroy his Jewishness would be to destroy him—which is what they were trying to do in the death camps—and this is one reason why he must strive to continue believing and practicing. Because of the atrocities he endured while in the camps, especially through witnessing the death of his father while he was still in the camp, Wiesel's faith in God is even more important to the question of suffering. His father was someone whom he dearly loved and respected and someone who had passed an important heritage down to

him, as Eliezer ben Shlomo, meaning “son of Shlomo”. To continue his heritage is a tradition and duty that Elie embraced in his boyhood and relishes today.

But how can Elie trust God, how can he believe in him after all that he has experienced? He says, “Abraham and Moses...teach us that it is permissible to accuse God, provided it be done in the name of faith in God. If that hurts, so be it. Sometimes we must accept the pain of faith so as not to lose it” (*Memoirs* 84). Here, Wiesel evokes the most instrumental message in his ability to continue his faith. Like the initial reaction of Job and J.B. when they ask “Shall we accept the good and not the evil?,” Wiesel points out that one’s faith must survive being stretched to prove its resiliency. Perhaps like Milton concludes in *Areopagitica*—“I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary”—Wiesel realizes that faith is strengthened through one’s experiences (Milton 1462). This is what he is taught by his friend and teacher, Moshe the Beadle:

‘Man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks Him... That is the true dialogue. Man questions God and God answers. But we don’t understand his answers. We can’t understand them. Because they come from the depth of the soul, and they stay there until death. You will find the true answers, Eliezer, only within yourself’” (*Night* 2)

Ultimately, Wiesel learns that we do not have the answers. He makes this conclusion with some acceptance and some sadness, but this is the only resolution that will allow him to keep living—to know that nothing justifies Auschwitz. Wiesel seems to have lost more faith in man than in God, however, from this experience. He says, “We are becoming more and more dehumanized... Furthermore, deep down, I believe that one day mankind will have to pay for Auschwitz” (Cargas 31). Wiesel’s ability to trust in God allows him to accept both God and suffering without justification and without

understanding. He takes somewhat of a Job-like point of view, in that his answer is that there will never be an answer. Wiesel believes that questions are more important than answers, as he says, “questions remain; the answers change,” and argues that “What divides people is not the question, it is the answer” (Cargas 105).

Thus, for Wiesel, not finding an answer is the answer that he must accept from God. And he realizes that, although God’s silence can be frustrating, we must leave it all up to God to decide. In a chapter of *Memoirs*, Wiesel examines God’s relationship to suffering and leaves the reader with this idea:

He is both question and answer. For us mortals, He is at once link and sundering, pain and healing, injury and peace, prayer and pardon. He is, and that must be enough for us. I confess, however, that sometimes it is not enough for me. Nothing is enough for me when I consider the convulsions our century has endured. God’s role is important in that context. (104-105)

But this is, for Wiesel, “yet another question” (*Memoirs* 105).

Chapter 5

The Challenge of Suffering

In the face of human suffering, one must find a way to deal with life as best as he or she can. As seen in the experiences of Job, J.B., Kushner, and Wiesel, each questions God's role in his suffering, struggles with the existence of suffering itself, and finds a way to get on with his life in the aftermath. One reaction that we have not found, though, is the absence of anger or bitterness and the refusal to question suffering as something other than a part of life that must be overcome. This reaction, while not necessarily satisfying to many, allows for perhaps one of the most uplifting ways to deal with it.

In the recently-released movie *Life is Beautiful*, the main character, played by Italian actor and director Roberto Benigni, is an Italian Jew who is deported with his wife and son to a concentration camp in the late years of the war. Benigni's character refuses to let his son know what is happening and refuses to let his life be ruined by it. He goes to great lengths to make sure that his son believes this experience is all a game, so that his son may not know the fear of concentration camp life. In one instance, he takes an unbelievable risk as he sees the loudspeaker unattended and uses the opportunity to give words of encouragement to his wife, letting her know that he and her son are still alive. Even when he is caught by a German soldier in his attempts to find his wife and escape, he plays the clown for his son, who is peeking at him through a slit in his hiding place. His son has no idea that his father is marching to his death. In the end, the son is reunited with his mother as the camp is liberated, and the viewers find that the narrator was this young boy. He says, "This is the sacrifice that my father made for me..." and we understand that the possibility of his father's escape from German gunfire was, at best, a desperate hope.

In this movie, we see someone who, in the face of tremendous tragedy, embraced life with perseverance and joy in an ultimate sacrifice for those he loved. He refused to let suffering dictate his attitude and his life, perhaps because he knows that his days are limited, and he wants to use them as best he can. But more importantly, he sacrifices his own human right to question the justice in suffering and finds that love can prevail amidst tragedy, much like the message in J.B. While he does not enter into any discussion or give any indication of his theological beliefs at that time, we see his acts and his motivation as an unwavering love for his wife and child. Through his actions, we see him relishing life, releasing suffering, and disowning anguish. For this man and his family, this is the answer, the only way to get on with their lives—to really live and to believe that life is joy, that life is beautiful despite misery and pain.

In Mira Kimmelman's *Echoes from the Holocaust, A Memoir*, she finds good even amongst all of the evil of the Holocaust. She says, "There is no absolute evil. Even among the SS, there were good people" (Lecture 3/22/99). She highlights the things that such people did to help her and others like her—to receive more food, to get a better job—to make their lives more bearable. She says, "Some of the rescuers were uneducated peasants, some were educated people, but all listened to their hearts even when they put themselves in danger" (*Echoes* 165). Yet she holds no bitterness for what has happened to her, for her suffering, but she emphasizes "the duty to remember" and instructs her readers, "Teach it, tell it, read it" (*Echoes* 165).

In *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, the voice of a hopeful, idealistic child shines through as she says, "...in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart" (287). As she knows that her family's possibility of escape is becoming

increasingly grim, she says “I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again” (287). Touched by these words, we are struck by her optimism and her will to live. Her love of life is something that the Nazis cannot take that away from her, even in the cramped space in which her family must hide for two long years.

It is the voices of these souls that lead us down a different path in understanding suffering. The optimism and perseverance that these people offer is similar to the attitude of Paul in his epistles to the new Christians of different communities. Paul, however, articulates the source of his strength as that which God has given him through Christ and finds a closeness to God in the midst of all his suffering, something totally different from the beliefs in any of the situations we have explored thus far. In Paul’s works and in other parts of the New Testament, Christianity expounds on new and different meanings and conclusions of suffering. Hauser’s article explores the different ways that the Old Testament and New Testament explore suffering, as he says that the Old Testament focuses on the meaning and justification of suffering, while the New Testament emphasizes that “(1) God gives strength for life and (2) God gives strength in suffering” (18). This shift, not exclusive to Christians, is the shift from questioning “Why?” to asking God for help in these times. While this is the shift that Kushner made in his mode of thinking, he took a different avenue to arrive there. For Christianity, especially for Paul, suffering brings a certain intimacy with God through Christ’s suffering on the Cross. We often hear the phrase that someone has “his own cross to bear,” a Christian idea that we must accept our suffering as Christ accepted his, in an effort to link our

suffering with that of Christ. Thus, in Paul's experience, "Instead of alienating him from God, [his] trials have become privileged occasions for experiencing God's presence" (Hauser 20).

Through this intimacy with Christ in suffering, Paul emphasizes the fruits of suffering as the love that comes from a deeper relationship with God. In Paul's lament, though, he does not ask for reasons for his suffering; rather, he puts his suffering to use in his quest for spiritual fulfillment:

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8: 35-39).

While we know that "The New Testament does not claim that [Jesus] is the neat and rational explanation," this viewpoint gives an outlet for suffering through the experience of Christ and the love of God (Buttrick 152). In this passage, Paul finds that God's love transcends our own suffering, a conclusion similar to that of J.B.'s wife in her idea that love overwhelms and overshadows suffering. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul defines love through a series of descriptions, one of which says, "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7). Thus, a believer's love for God and God's love for his children are bonds which suffering cannot break, according to Paul and the New Testament.

For Christianity, the New Testament offers comfort for the questions that Job leaves unanswered. Through this comfort, we are not given justification for our

suffering, “But we *are* told that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. That is to say, there has been a Breakthrough, a Daybreak, the beginning of a New Age. Nothing less can account for New Testament joy” (Buttrick 153). Thus, for Christians, “Faith in Christ sets the whole issue of pain and evil in the Daybreak,” and this is the answer that the Christian image of God is able to offer (154).

While many of us have difficulty understanding God’s love in the face of suffering, the one conclusion that seems steady through most works explored in this paper is that God’s works are a mystery to man. Moreso, his greatness is something which human comprehension may not ever be able to fully grasp, as Paul says, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 2:25). Wiesel perhaps most eloquently defines this position in his *Memoirs*: “But it is not our place to make decisions for God. He alone has discretion in the thousands of ways of joining His suffering to ours. We can neither elicit nor reject them, but can only seek to be worthy of them, even without understanding. Where God is concerned, all is mystery” (*Memoirs* 104).

Perhaps this mystery is more apparent when we consider the words that we have been trying to reconcile: suffering and justice. The words themselves are inarguably incompatible. In the denotative sense, suffering is defined as “pain, misery, hardship,” and justice is defined as “fairness, righteousness” (*Merriam Webster* 720, 407). To think that pain is ever fair or that misery could be righteous is not something that many of us are not willing to do. But with the pursuit of faith and the acceptance of God as the almighty and loving father, we must accept that we have to strive for fairness and seek out righteousness, even amongst our worst pain or misery. For Wiesel, this conclusion is

an important mission for earthly life. While he is not obliged by the Christian promise of an afterlife, he recognizes that we must endure our suffering: “Precisely because death awaits us in the end, we must live fully. Precisely because an event seems devoid of meaning, we must give it one. Precisely because the future eludes us, we must create it” (*Memoirs* 17).

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